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Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ*: Market Segmentation, Mass Marketing and Promotion, and the Internet

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Abstract

The pre-release publicity surrounding the Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of the Christ*, warrants an in-depth look at the role that market segmentation and marketing promotion, including use of the Internet, have played in the overall success of the film. As background, films commonly classified as biblical epics are referenced in order to construct a framework that will demonstrate how the promotion of this genre of film, with the exception of the Internet, has essentially changed very little over time. This paper is not a review of the film nor is it intended to be a brief course in marketing. Rather, it is intended to be used as vehicle by which readers can more fully understand how marketing components such as market segmentation, mass marketing and promotion have been used since the earliest days of biblical film making. This paper will also address how the Internet has assumed an important role in the successful marketing and promotion of *The Passion of the Christ*.

Biblically Based Films – An Overview

[1] According to Babbington and Evans, "The term 'Hollywood Biblical Epic' is taken to cover three sub-types of film: The Old Testament Epic; The Christ Film; and The Roman/ Christian Epic (of the beginnings of post-Christ Christianity)" (Babbington and Evans 1993, 4). This paper will look specifically at films commonly considered part of the genre known as the Christ Film. Babbington and Evans state that prior to the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, four Christ themed films had been released—the original *The King of Kings* directed by Cecil B. De Mille in 1927, *King of Kings* directed by Nicholas Ray in 1961, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* directed by George Stevens in 1965, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 1988 (Babbington and Evans 1993).

[2] The genre of biblically based films can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Hovet notes that when the Kalem Company produced the first motion picture version of *Ben-Hur*, it was a 13-minute film that had been advertised as possibly one of the most superb moving picture spectacles ever made in America (Hovet 2001). The success of the film *Ben-Hur* that would eventually encourage future movie makers to produce films with various biblical themes. It was not long before adaptations of Lew Wallace's novel *Ben Hur* (d. Olcott 1907), the Jesus story, *From the Manger to the Cross* (d. Olcott 1912), and the Italian religious epic *Quo Vadis* (d.

Gauzzoni 1912) were both converted to the movie screen (Johnston 2000).

[3] The 1927 De Mille production of *The King of Kings* is commonly considered to be one of the most popular of all the movies depicting the life of Jesus. Amazingly it has been seen by as many as five hundred million people before it was remade into *King of Kings* starring Jeffery Hunter in 1961. The original version of *The King of Kings* was so popular that elementary, middle and high school students were dismissed early to be able to attend special afternoon showings. This illustrates one of the first instances of the use of market segmentation in film promotion.

[4] The 1950s ushered in an entirely new era in filmmaking made possible by several new advances including CinemaScope and Cinerama coupled with the inherent need to fill new larger screens with new even bigger budget films. The introduction and use of CinemaScope in particular and of stereophonic sound technology in the making and promotion of Henry Koster's 1953 classic *The Robe* became central components in one of Hollywood's biggest religious themed marketing campaigns. Audiences who were attracted to these large budget, big cast performances of biblically themed films, were now being lured to screenings of these films with the promises of even greater sensory involvement through the use of the newly promoted technologies.

Marketing of Biblically Based Films

[5] Targeting a biblical film's promotional efforts toward specific audiences is not new. As mentioned above, as early as 1927 school children were given time off from school to view *The King of Kings*. Prior to its release, efforts had already been made to show it to selected, targeted, audiences including various women's clubs throughout the New York City area and to religious groups of various denominations throughout the country (Maltby 1990). From September 1926, when filming began, to January 17, 1927, when the film was completed, was a high point with regard to collaboration between the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDAs) and local churches to coordinate pre-release publicity.

[6] This trend of targeting specific audiences continued in 1933 with the release of *The Sign of the Cross*, when Paramount identified three specific market segments for targeting of the film's promotional efforts. The first segment was comprised of general moviegoers, including movie enthusiasts who were not specifically interested in films with religious themes but liked the spectacle, drama, excitement and thrills associated with them. The second segment was comprised of movie enthusiasts who were as regular church-goers. This segment would become the group that would eventually be reached directly through their respective clergy, their sermons, and in 1933 for the first time, by direct-mail campaigns. The third group was made up of the nation's primary and secondary schools. Realizing that most of these films were historically correct, the Los Angeles Board of Education showed significant interest in showing the film throughout its various public school districts. In this way the film could then be marketed the same way that the film was marketed to churches—directly through boards

of education (Hall 2002).

[7] A further advance in the target marketing of religiously based films can be seen in the promotion of the 1965 movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, that included a specific list of points that were actually provided by the film's promotional department detailing the manner in which biblically themed films were to be promoted. These efforts began with the realization that in the minds of the public, such films were not just another movie but a production that would actually be an honour to see.

[8] Next were editorials in America's leading publications, including *Life Magazine*, seen as an important component of the new marketing mix. Publicity for *The Ten Commandments* (1956) contained no specific national advertising with the exception of, once again, religious periodicals that were not used until approximately three months after its opening. Promotion of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) included quotations from the Pope and several Vatican newspaper articles as well as quotes from the Rev. Dan M. Potter, Director of the Protestant Council of New York. Groups such as the Legion of Decency, the Rabbinical Association and various Buddhist groups were also contacted regarding the film in order to create interest prior to its release. Many of the prominent department stores in New York City including Macy's were encouraged to place ads in newspapers promoting the film (Hall 2002). Promotional activities specifically surrounding the release of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* included many of the same marketing techniques used in the promotion of *The Sign of the Cross* (1933), many of which would later be used in the promotion of *The Passion of the Christ*.

[9] Distribution of various promotional items including a souvenir programme brochure, a book on the making of the film, a reprint of the original Oursler novel, school study guides and children's books were all made available to various market segments. Compilations of scholarly research materials including a biography of the director (George Stevens) and the screenplay of the film were also made available to the press. A traveling exhibition of actual props, costumes and photographs from the film was coordinated and arranged by the Smithsonian Institution to tour museums in the nation's key cities. Additional exhibits were produced for use in such varied locales as department stores, churches, Sunday schools and primary and secondary schools. Audio-visual aids such as filmstrips and slide presentations were created and used as promotional tools by religious organizations. A thirty-minute colour documentary on the making of the film was produced exclusively for showing on network television on Easter Sunday in 1965. It was subsequently distributed as an extended theatrical trailer. Previews of the film, especially for religious leaders, educators, leading industrialists, government officials, psychologists, youth leaders, and Boy and Girl Scout officials were also shown. Gifts including "tasteful mementoes" of the film were distributed to members of the press (Hall 2002).

[10] In retrospect, the marketing activities mentioned above are not so very different from those used in the eventual promotion of *The Passion of the Christ*.

Marketing The Passion of the Christ

[11] On February 25 2004, after a yearlong debate involving Mel Gibson's self-financed \$30 million film, *The Passion of the Christ*, the production opened on 4,643 screens in 3,006 theatres across the United States. Two months later in April of 2004 the total number of theatres had grown to 3,408 and had generated box office receipts in excess of \$386.6 million. Advance sales of the film alone amounted to more than \$10 million. Gibson, who had shunned Hollywood's traditional publicity machine to market the film himself, relied instead, as previously noted, on methods that had been used in the promotion of earlier religiously themed films. These included personal invitations to many high profile church and religious leaders, including such varied religious personalities as the Pope, the Rev. Billy Graham and many highly recognizable televangelists (Cobb 2004).

[12] What makes the promotion of *The Passion of the Christ* interesting is the manner in which it was marketed and promoted, not in the manner in which many of today's films are marketed but once again, as with earlier biblically themed films, through targeted grassroots marketing and merchandising efforts to very specific market segments along with a healthy dose of controversy. Churches whose leaders had been specifically invited to view a preview of the film on their own encouraged their congregations to purchase large blocks of tickets. Stores, including traditionally based Christian retailers, soon stocked their shelves with film-related products such as licensed cross-nail pendants, crosses, coffee mugs, coffee table books and artwork (Kjos 2004).

[13] According to Caldwell the strategy behind the marketing of *The Passion of the Christ* to America's growing Christian audience comprised of Evangelicals, conservative Roman Catholics, and Charismatics can be directly attributed to A. Larry Ross, president of a Dallas-based Christian public relations and marketing firm. Ross, a recognized expert in presenting popular culture to Evangelical audiences, worked for twenty-three years as the Rev. Billy Graham's media director. He was also responsible for the marketing efforts behind *The Prince of Egypt*, produced by Jeffrey Katzenberg and *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie* to Evangelicals (Caldwell 2004). Another factor in the success of the marketing of the film was that many Evangelicals had, in the past, felt generally excluded from Hollywood with regard to their values being misrepresented or even lampooned in the press.

[14] Few religiously themed films have ever generated the attention that has come to be associated with *The Passion of the Christ*. Following the explosion of media attention that occurred almost immediately after its opening and with stronger than expected word-of-mouth publicity, the film demonstrated its marketability in ways that very few films had ever demonstrated. "Five days after its release, *The Passion of the Christ* had grossed \$125.2 million, edging *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* for a five day opening record. One day later it passed *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* which had held the record for a sub-titled film. By the end of March it took over first place as the most popular R-rated film in the U.S. and by the first week of April edged *Forrest*

Gump out of the no. 10 spot on the all-time list of blockbuster films” (Matthews 2004, 42).

[15] Since its opening, the film has grossed in excess of \$363 million and is now the eighth-highest grossing film of all time. *The Passion of the Christ* is expected to finish its domestic run with ticket sales in excess of \$375 million in box-office receipts. Those numbers will continue to swell when the film is released internationally, beginning in Europe and later in Latin America. Industry analyst Anne Thompson reported in the Washington Post that “when all receipts are tallied from *Passion*’s worldwide theatrical run, its DVD and video sales, pay and network TV syndication, and books and merchandising, Gibson’s personal account may be enriched by more than half a billion dollars” (Mathews 2004).

Segmenting of Audiences as a Marketing Strategy: Evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics and Charismatics

[16] Groundwork for promoting the film was in place months before its actual release. “One of the first of many private screenings was held in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a picture postcard city that today is home to dozens of evangelical organizations, including Focus on the Family, the International Bible Society, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Christian Booksellers Association, Concerned Women of America, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, and Youth for Christ” (Caldwell 2004, 216). Caldwell points out that for the next several months Gibson, as the film’s primary promoter, began spreading the word to Christian leaders across the country, including Catholic bishops such as Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver (Caldwell 2004).

[17] “A spokesman for Mel Gibson, Alan Nierob, was very upfront with *The New York Times* about church outreach being part of the overall marketing plan” (Parker 2004). “According to the article, Nierob likened it to the word-of-mouth and Internet buzz that turned ‘*The Blair Witch Project*’ into a sleeper hit. The distributor’s grass-roots approach centered on Christians and church leaders. In fact, before the film even officially opened, \$3 million in revenues were recorded as groups, many from various churches, took advantage of advance sales” (Parker 2004).

[18] *The Passion* was initially marketed through mass marketing in U.S. Catholic and Protestant—predominately evangelical—churches. As with earlier religious films, screenings held throughout the country were dominated by churchgoers whose congregations had bought blocks of tickets well in advance (Szabo 2004). This technique is similar to the manner in which the original version of *The King of Kings* was promoted in 1927. In addition, prior to its official opening on February 25 (Ash Wednesday), nearly 3,000 people attending the National Religious Broadcasters annual convention were shown a sneak preview that was specifically arranged for faith based organizations to encourage grassroots support for the controversial film. This was similar in many ways to special screenings of earlier films with similar Christ based themes.

[19] Relatively non-traditional marketing methods were also used to generate consumer awareness. “Ad company faithHighway has the rights to a 20-second movie clip and has signed up 300 churches at \$795 each to air the trailer on TV with an additional 10-second plug for their particular church. For \$1,790, the company placed an individual church’s pastor in the ad” (Howard 2004). This is not, however, the first time that movie clips had been used for promotional purposes. As noted above, the promotion of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* included a thirty minute colour documentary on the making of the film for showing on network television, and subsequent distribution to clubs, schools and churches (Stern, Jefford and Debona 1999).

[20] Driving the marketing and promotion of *The Passion of the Christ* was the fact that it had a huge natural audience. “According to an ABC News/Beliefnet poll, a quarter of Americans identify themselves as evangelical Christians” (Parker 2004). This was exactly the type of audience that marketers dream about and the exact market Gibson needed to help him in the promotion of his film.

[21] However, in terms of box-office success, nothing quite like *The Passion* had been seen before. Even megahits such as *Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter films did not see as much early demand. Once the Christian community rallies behind a film and supports it, they are very effective at word-of-mouth and grassroots marketing as well as bringing their friends to the theatre to see a film (Thompson 2004).

Mass Marketing and Promotion

[22] Mass marketing and promotion of the Christian marketing materials associated with the film was placed in the hands of Outreach, Inc. a Vista, California-based ministry responsible for the production of many of the Christian marketing materials that came to be associated with the film. The mass marketing actually began after each of the initial thirty screenings of the film at which time the film’s audience was offered the opportunity to purchase some of the promotional materials produced by Outreach. These included door hangers, invitation cards, church bulletin inserts, Bible excerpts and study guides. In addition, in keeping with the latest trends in technology, over 250,000 DVD’s about the film were mailed to ministers’ nationwide (Caldwell 2004).

[23] *The Passion of the Christ* Website Outreach offered visitors a detailed timeline, beginning in December of 2003, for specifically planning a week of events surrounding the movie to be used in February and March. In early January, Outreach reminded ministers to place orders for various supporting materials. By the end of the month, visitors to the *Passion* website were being instructed to show trailers of the film to their congregations. In February the instructions became more specific including hanging banners, inviting friends to view the movie and to attend follow-up sessions. However, one of the most successful ways for churches to promote the film was through renting of entire theatres, which had the effect of increasing both the film's revenues and churches' evangelizing opportunities.

[24] One of the more extreme examples concerning the promotion of the film centered around Arch Bonnema, a member of Prestonwood Baptist church in Plano, Texas that has a membership in excess of 23,000. After viewing the film in December 2003, he decided to purchase all 6,000 seats at a local 27-screen multiplex for the first showing of the film on February 25 2004 for a total cost of \$42,000. Most were distributed to church members (3,000) and seminary students (2,000), with the remainder being sent to friends with the expectation that they would use them. In his words, the film was the biggest opportunity for evangelism this century.

Ancillary Markets

[25] Ancillary markets provided additional opportunities for the promotion of the film, many of which had never been used before, especially for a religiously based film.

[26] For instance, “more than 1 million ‘witness cards,’ which promote the movie on one side, and have an evangelical message on the other, have been distributed” (Howard 2004) said Dwight Robinson, Director of Marketing for Bob Siemon Designs, the lead licensee for the film and a distributor of jewelry and other marketing items. “A pack of 25 cards—intended to promote Christianity—sell for \$5.95” (Howard 2004). Witness cards were additionally purchased in the thousands by churches and religious organizations to be used as part of their evangelizing efforts. The company added 35 employees to its staff of 125. It has additionally sold in excess of 150,000 crosses (Thompson 2004). “Siemon shipped about 100,000 small and large pewter nail pendants on a leather string” (Howard 2004). They cost \$12.99 and \$16.99” (Howard 2004).

[27] The film’s predominately instrumental soundtrack, released by Sony Music and Integrity Music, a Christian label, sold over 50,000 units on the day it was released. There have been only two other score-driven soundtracks—*Star Wars, Episode I: The Phantom Menace* and *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* that have sold more (Gardner 2004). The soundtrack would ultimately peak at number 17 on the Billboard album charts (Thompson 2004).

[28] An album featuring artists such as Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, Leonard Cohen and Ricky Skaggs along with a new song by Jessi Colter, Waylon Jennings’ widow and their son Scooter, has also been released.

[29] According to Fox Home Entertainment, 4.1 million DVD/VHS copies of the film were sold on the first day of its release. This exceeded Fox's sales estimates by 20 percent. Monthly trade magazine "DVD Exclusive" editor-in-chief Scott Hettrick estimated that the DVD alone could ultimately generate sales of as many as 18 million copies amounting to \$400 million (Haberman, Yahoo News.com).

[30] Lee Strobel, co-author of a study guide called *Experiencing the Passion of Jesus*, which is distributed by the Willow Creek Association, is one of several prominent Christian authors writing books based on the Passion phenomenon. The United States

Conference of Catholic Bishops has published, *The Bible, the Jews and the Death of Jesus: A Collection of Catholic Documents*. The Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations has also issued a study guide about passion plays, *Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and its Portrayal*. The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews has written *A Jewish Response to Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ*.

[31] *The Passion: Photography from the Movie* is the movie's only licensed tie-in book, now in its eighth printing (Thompson 2004). Dan Balow, executive director of the international publishing division of Tyndale House Publishers, a prominent producer of Christian books, said that the company initially printed 150,000 copies which was considered a big run. Tyndale has been struggling to keep up with demand. It has sold 650,000 copies and intends to finally publish the book in eight foreign languages.

[32] Publishers are increasing press runs for other movie-related books. *The Passion of the Christ: Fifty Reasons Why He Came to Die* by John Piper has 1.6 million copies in print. *His Passion: Christ's Journey to the Resurrection* by Dave Veerman has more than 200,000 copies. "The biggest seller at Family Christian Book Stores is a colorful, behind-the-scenes coffee-table book about the *Passion*, selling for \$24.99" (Howard 2004).

[33] NASCAR also entered the ancillary market when "Interstate Batteries Chairman Norm Miller asked that the hood of the race car his company sponsors, Bobby Labonte's No. 18, be emblazoned with the *Passion* logo in the recent Daytona 500" (Howard 2004).

Use of the Internet in the Marketing of *The Passion of the Christ*

[34] So far, I have primarily addressed the many similarities and some of the differences in the ways in which *The Passion of the Christ* has been marketed/promoted compared to earlier biblical epics. There is one significant difference between the marketing of *The Passion* and earlier biblically themed movies: the use of the Internet.

[35] A survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project dated November 18 to December 14 2003 revealed that 128 million Americans use the Internet and of that number, 38% used email to send and/or forward material with religious content. In addition, 32% indicated that they regularly read online news accounts concerning religious events and/or affairs. Based on these results it is no surprise that churches' "use of the Internet to disseminate information about *The Passion* was aided by the distributor's own efforts. Icon Distribution enlisted the help of OnCore Group; a "faith-based" marketing firm that claimed it was "Creating Brand Evangelists." OnCore created a site at www.passionmaterials.com where Internet users could order posters, door hangers, postcards, and the like for the cost of shipping and handling. The company even posted a "Pastors' Action Kit" explaining how one might

use the materials to communicate with a congregation (Parker 2004).

[36] An Internet site was created, www.StudentsHavePassion.com, that has been called a “student mobilizer” (Parker 2004). “There are chat rooms, a press room for student newspapers, and a ‘promotion report’ link where students can let the film’s distributors know how things are going on their campus” (Parker 2004).

[37] A visit to *The Passion*’s promotional website, www.thepassionofthechrist.com, offers more than the expected movie soundtrack. A link to www.thepassionshirts.com offers several T-shirt designs, including crown of thorns shirts, shirts with the words “The Passion” in Aramaic, and shirts with a crown of thorns dripping blood down the centre of the garment. A link to www.sharethepassionofthechrist.com offers only “officially licensed products” for the movie. These official products include coffee mugs with an image of the crucifix from the film, or coffee mugs with the film’s Aramaic logo. Another link takes you to www.thepassiondownloads.com, where you can find screen savers, posters, fliers, e-mail graphics, “fax blasts” and bulletin inserts. (www.bizjournals.com, 3-19-04)

Conclusion

[38] Since the early twentieth century, film companies have used traditional forms of marketing to promote biblically based films. There are, however, several ways in which *The Passion of the Christ* was marketed that set it apart from the way in which earlier biblical epics were marketed. These include the incorporation of the Internet as a marketing medium in addition to the ancillary markets addressed discussed above. By targeting specific demographic groups such as the religious denominations, and by incorporating and using the latest form of mass media, the Internet, *The Passion of the Christ* not only became a huge financial success but an example of how biblically themed films may be expected to be marketed in the future.

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